

THE ORIGINS OF UNCLE REMUS

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Joel Chandler Harris's **Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings** (1881) is a key work in American literature and American folklore. The immense popularity of the work and its successors ¹ indicates that a large reading public was familiar with folklore--the concept--and Afro-American examples of it at least seven years before the founding of the American Folklore Society in 1888. In fact, the publication of the Uncle Remus tales arguably helped generate the interest in folklore that led to the formation of both the Chicago Folklore Society and the American Folklore Society (2). Further, **Uncle Remus:**

His Songs and Sayings must be considered one of the first collections of Afro-American folktales. Harris wrote the folktales down and arranged to have them printed in a dialect which accurately represented the narrators and their subculture. Finally, in creating a frame within which animal tales are narrated, Harris presented a portrait of the tales' context.

It is this final accomplishment which has generated disdain for the Uncle Remus tales among folklorists. Outright criticism of the collections dates back at least to Elsie Clews Parsons, whose criticism Richard M. Dorson and others have since repeated. Parsons' criticism, expressed in a review of **Uncle Remus Returns**, is based on the accusation that "just as Mr. Harris preserved the pattern of the tale very faithfully, so the setting...is a thing apart, not appearing in any of the other recorded tales" (Parsons 1919:492) (3). That is, Parsons objects

to Harris's frames (which create some context), preferring straight transcriptions of collected tales. Folklorists since then have criticized Harris for his inclusion of these "produced contexts" for the reader of the tales. This led to the notion that one could, and perhaps should, separate the folktales from their "literary trappings." And thus, when Richard Chase collected the anthology of Uncle Remus tales, he published only the animal tales from all eight books. But he also modified Harris's dialect, perhaps in order to maintain some uniformity within the volume, and omitted the proverbs, songs, and dialect sketches from the first volume. While Chase brought together all the animal tales in one handy volume, his editorial decisions hinder a full consideration of Harris's work as author, folklorist, and ethnographer.

Two recent works by American folklorists have succeeded in focusing attention on Harris and his work. The first was Florence Baer's **Sources and Analogues of the Uncle Remus Tales** (1980), which pays particular attention to the animal tales. Baer analyzes the tales comparatively to argue that most of them are ultimately of African origin. The second work is Robert Hemenway's edition of the original Uncle Remus volume, published as a Penguin paperback in 1982. In addition to Harris's thirty-four "Legends of the Old Plantation" (i.e., the animal tales introduced by Uncle Remus), Hemenway includes from the original edition the "Plantation Proverbs," "His Songs," "A Story of the War," and "His Sayings." Further, Hemenway precedes Harris's introduction to the work with his own

thirty page introduction, which adds a great deal of information and context.

There still remains, however, a great deal of work to do on the Uncle Remus material of Joel Chandler Harris. For instance, there has been no analysis of the proverbs and songs of Uncle Remus, published originally in the Atlanta **Constitution**, but largely gathered in Harris's first Uncle Remus book. Nor has a full chronology of Harris's Uncle Remus work ever been published--that is, when the work was first published in the **Constitution** and then when the material appeared in book form--much less a full study of the changes made in the material over the intervening months or years.

I would like to focus primarily on Joel Chandler Harris's early career with the **Constitution**, exploring the events which led eventually to the publication of **Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings** (1880). Harris left his position with the Savannah **Morning News**, where he had worked as associate editor under William Tappan Thompson, in September of 1876, taking his family and moving to Atlanta rather than stay in the yellow fever-ridden low country. In Atlanta, Harris took a part-time job writing for the **Constitution**. In October, Evan P. Howell bought half interest in the newspaper, assumed the editorial duties himself, and named as associate editors Harris and Henry W. Grady. Harris then began writing his column, "Roundabout in Georgia."

Neither Professor Hemenway's introduction nor Florence Baer's introductory chapter investigates in adequate detail Harris's dialect sketches and their predecessors, the Old Si sketches by Sam Small. This

omission is surprising, since dialect sketches made up half of the first Uncle Remus volume, and at one time were envisioned as the entire contents of the book. When Harris began his editorial work for the **Constitution** as a columnist and copy-editor, the newspaper contained a column of Negro dialect written by Sam Small. The history of these Negro dialect sketches in the **Constitution** is vital, because, once Harris began to write his own sketches, the character of Uncle Remus originated in them. Under Harris, Uncle Remus effectively outgrew the original dialect sketch form, growing into a spokesman for songs, character sketches, animal tales, and proverbs. The origin of Uncle Remus from the dialect sketches of Sam Small and Joel Chandler Harris needs to be presented completely so that contemporary readers and scholars can fully appreciate what Harris accomplished between 1876 and 1879. Harris moved from imitating the crude burlesque sketches of Small to writing his first animal tales, narrated by the fully-developed character of Uncle Remus. The history of this development is vital to an informed judgement of what Harris accomplished and how it relates to American folklore.

Briefly, Sam Small began writing dialect sketches in January, 1876 (Small 1917). The columns, appearing at irregular intervals, featured a number of "characters" (names), with Old Si appearing in over half of the sketches. They dealt with "current topics" of Atlanta life, including politics, education, religion, finance, law enforcement, and unemployment. The sketches consist almost exclusively of dialogue between (apparently) a white,

educated spokesman and Old Si, presumably an elderly black man. The following examples of the Old Si dialect sketches are representative of Small's writings before October 1876:

OLD SI ON CHURCH POLITICS

Old Si's most prominent political idea is "de bustin' ob de freedman's bank." When we asked him yesterday:

"Si, why don't some of the negroes join the democrats?" he replied:

"Kase hit's 'ginst dere 'ligion, yer see, an' dat's de reezin!"

"That is not so plain a reason, however."

"Well, yer see hit's dis way--de preachers tells de niggers dat dey must hang togedder like the children ob Izrul an' follow de lead of Mozis--an' dat dere Mozis is de publican party dat fotch dem ter dere freedom!"

"Well, I can see how that might be believed."

"Yes, sah, dat's hit, fur a nigger is a mighty beleebin' set ob fokes when de doctrin' cos' him some money an' bread an' meat."

"But that cost some of you money once?"

"Bress yo' soul, hit did! Dat's whar makes me shake date party lik I do. My berleef am dis, dat if de 'publican party ud steal all de hard earned sabings ob de nigger dat was 'posited in de Freedmun's Bank dey's mighty lierbul fur to do wuss. De fac is dat I'se feer'd when dey git de niggers inter de church an' gits 'em voted dat dey'll steal all de passpotes ter de happy lan', and when de debbil comes 'long he'll fin' all de niggers still standin' dar holdin' on to de empty bag!" (4)

We passed on thinking "logic is logic."

OLD SI ON CARPET-BAGGERS

"Yes, sah; hits time fur dem ter git skase!" said Old Si.

"Who do you mean?"

"Dese hyar kyarpet-sackers from 'way up yander in de norf of de Lord knows whar?"

"Why, they are your friends--the black man's guardians, aint they?"

"I takes time ter notice dat dey gyards de nigger mighty close ter see dat he don't git nuffin widout dey gittin' de bigges' sheer, ef dey can!"

"Then you've fallen out with them?"

"Bress yo' soul, honey, old Si nebber fell in wid dem yet, dey fell in wid him an' all de res' of de darkies, but dey's frazzling out mon'rous fas'! Yer see, dey's er kind ob perliterkil bed bugs, dem fellers is, and de nigger's gittin pow'ful tired ob habbin' dem 'round in his bed--an' he's gwine ter put sum dimmycrat turpytime on de bed slates dis fall! Dat' what makes me say what I do!"

And the old man was in dead, sober earnest.

AMOS'S BOOK-KEEPER

We asked Amos how his boy was getting on at school.

"Pleg take dat boy, I done tuck him 'way frum dat school."

"What, what for?"

"Uh, oh! he wuz gettin' most' too smart down dar wid dat book larnin'. 'Iwon't do fer some niggers er be too agikatid."

"Why not, Amos?"

"Well, sah, jess take dat boy, frinstance. I put dat boy ter keep books fer me 'bout de sellin' of de garden truck dis summer. Well, sah, he jiss rit down charges dar in de book fer all de truck dat I tuck out de gardin, an' charges fer all dat I sole, an' charges fer all dat we eat in de house,

an' den credit hissef wid de little 'mounts dat I let him hab 'long at odd 'casions, an' den he go an' add dem all up, an' struck er balance, he say!"

"And how did you come out?"

"Come out? 'Fore de good Marster, I didn't come out at all! Dat boy done struck me for 'bout thutty-fibe dollers, 'sides his wages as de bookkeepah. Now dat's what de figgers sed."

"Well, what did you do?"

"I jes' burn up dat book right dat an' den, 'scharged de bookkeepah, an' hire him ober agin ter saw wood fer his board an' close."

"You did?"

"Yes, sah, I did dat. Why, boss, ef dat boy he'd kep' dat book onme tell now he'd done own dat house and gyardin patch, an' bin chargin' me an his ole mammy fer bed an' bread! I tell yer dis hyar book-larnin' is ruinin' dis young breed ob niggers--'tis shore!"

OLD SI ON THE BLOODY SHIRT

Old Si came up puzzled yesterday morning.

"What is dis year bloody shu't dat day is tawkin' so much 'bout in de newspapers?"

"That is a figure of speech, Si, and is taken as a sign of the lies told up north about outrages and murders upon negroes down here by the rebels."

"Jess so! I jess wanted dat 'splained a leetle."

"Well, what do you think of it, anyhow?"

"What kin a man think ob sech affa'rs ez dat? An' dey's ralely gwine round up dat shakin' a bloody shu't an tellin' dat hit waz tuck from some outrage nigger?"

"That's the idea."

"Dat's cureus, shore! Whar dey fin' dem outrage niggers, young marster?"

"All through the South."

"Hey! heah in Gorgy too!"

"Yes, certainly."

"How cum dat I don't see sum ob dem outragers niggers, too?"

"You are too hard for me now!"

Then Si, arranged his shirt collar and went on:

"Yas, an' I bet dis heah han'-saw agin a dog-knife dat I be too hard fur dem outrage niggers, too, if I ketch up wid dem, 'kase Old Si done bin 'round heah 'nuff fur ter kno' dat when dey takes a bloody shu't, or anny odder kin' ob shu't offen a nigger down heah dey's gwine ter leab dat nigger in de cold wid a nakid back an' a mighty hankerin arter somebody else's gyarment?" (5)

Hemenway connects these dialect sketches to the popular minstrel show, and rightfully so. First, Small's sketches appeared during the heyday of American minstrel shows, and it is quite possible that Small began his Old Si series after watching the popularity of minstrel shows in Atlanta grow (Toll 1974). The Old Si sketches are also structured exactly like minstrel show sketches: the straight man-Interlocutor (Sam Small?) interrogates a blackfaced comic-Tambo-Bones (Old Si) (6). The straight man is white, well-educated, and speaks in standard English. The blackfaced comic speaks in "dialect." The minstrel show skits at the time were short dialogues, depending upon rapid banter between the two speakers. The humor in both the minstrel shows and the Old Si sketches is either visual (slapstick) or in specific verbal forms (farce, irony, and puns), so that a rapid pace and the need to sustain the humor are more important than the ability to concentrate on a particular theme

or topic. Minstrel show skits, like these dialect sketches, generally resembled a comic catechism, with the white Interlocutor questioning Tambo or Bones. Above all, both the minstrel show skits and the Old Si dialect sketches depend upon the comic stereotypes of Negroes: crude, uneducated, dishonest, disloyal, gullible, slow, and shiftless. Finally, both the Old Si newspaper sketches and the minstrel shows were intended for the entertainment of the same audience: whites. One can hardly agree with Small that his sketches "contained the truest negro dialect that had ever appeared in print" (Small 1917). Nor can one argue very persuasively that Small's sketches represent the Southern Negro so much as the minstrel show darky. Both forms of entertainment were aimed at white audiences and used stereotypes of blacks as the butt of humor.

Although Small's dialect sketches resemble minstrel show sketches closely, the **Constitution** sketches may demonstrate a different function. Small's Old Si sketches are not the "pure" entertainment that the minstrel show sketches may have been. Instead, time after time Small's spokesman (Old Si and the other Negro "characters") villify carpetbaggers, the Republican Party, and the federal government's bureaucracy. Old Si (representing Sam Small and perhaps the **Constitution**) yearns for the return of the Democratic Party to power, aware that this will put Southerners back in charge of Georgia state affairs rather than the Occupation personnel (carpetbaggers). That is, Small's dialect sketches are a form of propaganda during Reconstruction in

Georgia. Old Si was another spokesman that the **Constitution** printed to encourage the end of Georgia's Occupation and Reconstruction.

Sam Small was absent from the **Constitution** from September 1876 to January 1877. During that fall he travelled throughout the state as an officer of the state Democratic Party, speaking on behalf of the Democratic nominee, Samuel Tilden. The **Constitution**, a perennial supporter of the Democratic Party, allowed Small time off to speak and, in addition, covered the speeches prominently in the newspaper. When Captain Howell assumed the editorship of the newspaper in October, Small quit to begin a newspaper of his own, the **Evening Telegram and Sunday Herald**. Small's paper folded in January, despite the exclusive printing of the Old Si dialect sketches (Cousins 1968:95,99). In January 1877, Small returned to the **Constitution** as a dialect sketch writer and Old Si began to reappear on a frequent, if still irregular, basis.

During this gap, and particularly from 18 October 1876 to 30 January 1877, Joel Chandler Harris was assigned the duty of writing something to replace Small's dialect sketches. The following are Harris's first sketches as a dialect writer for the **Constitution**; they appeared because of Old Si's absence.

JEEMS ROBERSON'S LAST ILLNESS

A Jonesboro negro, while waiting for the train to go out last night, struck up with several old acquaintances. "How is Jeems Roberson?" asked

one, after the usual "time of day" had been passed.

"Did'n you hear 'bout Jim?" queries the Jonesboro darkey.

"I ain' heerd fum Jim since he cut loose from de chain gang. He ain't down wid de billiousness, is he?"

"Oh, no! Jim ain't sick, an' he ain't bin sick. He des wanted fer ter ride Mars Bob Proctor's mule de udder Sunday, an' de mule 'peered to have anudder ingagement. I done bin fool wid dat mule before an' I tole Jim he better not git tangled up wid her. But 'lowed he wuz a hoss-doctor; an' den he axed me fer a chew of terbacker, an' got de bridle, an' cotch de mule, and got on her --well, I spec I better go git my ticket. Dey tell me dis train goes a callyhootin."

"Hold on, you ain't tole us 'bout Jim," said one of his dusky auditors.

"I done tole you all I know. Jim got on de mule, an' she sorter hump herself, an' den der wuz a scuffle, and when de dus' blow 'way I see de nigger on de groun', and de mule eatin at de troff wid one uv Jim's galluses wropped roun' her hine leg. Den arterwards de kur'er he cum an' sed Jim died sorter accidental-like. Hit's des like I tell you; de nigger wuzn't sick a minnit. Well I got ter be gittin on. So long, boys!"

WAVING THE BLOODY SHIRT

The smoking-car attached to the Augusta train that came into Atlanta on Thursday was filled with rather a motley crowd. Two young men were playing old sledge on one of the cushions, a negro woman was nursing a sick baby, a dog somewhere under the seats was whining dolefully, a small boy was attempting to whistle while eating peanuts, and a northern man with a consumptive glare in his eye was gleaning information about Florida from a citizen of Atlanta. The aforesaid citizen had boarded the train at Decatur, and settling

himself near the northern man, had begun placidly to read the **Constitution**. His appearance was apparently reassuring to the latter, for he leaned over and remarked,

"Excust me sir; but do you know anything about Florida?"

"Florida! Why I'm just from Florida. I know the whole state from end to end."

"I understand there's a good deal of trouble between the whites and negroes in that section?"

"Why bless your soul, no! There's no trouble. Times are not what they used to be"--with a sigh. "Things have got to that pass in Florida that there are not more than twelve or fourteen negroes killed a day."

"Fourteen negroes a day!" gasped the northern man, turning as white as his consumptive tendencies would admit.

"That's all, sir. There's no fun in Florida at all. Times have changed since 1873. It has got so now that when you do kill a nigger, it's hard to tell whether he's a democrat or a republican.

The worst of it is, a new generation is coming on, and instead of shooting a nigger in the left eye, they shoot him in the stomach. Why three winters ago when I was in Florida, who brought in a nigger that wasn't shot in the eye, was put down as an amateur. However"--in a hopeful tone --"you may find some good sport in the lower counties."

The consumptive tourist made no reply, but late that evening Ballard checked his baggage in the direction of Aiken.

POLITICS AND PROVISIONS

"I dunno what good dis 'publican bizness duz me," said a country darkey yesterday adjusting the body of a little one-horse car he had driven to town. "I been drivin' dis shebang roun' all day, an' I ain't seed no 'publican resh up an'

give me more fer my wood dan a democrat 'ud give. Ef dey came an' done it, I ain't seed 'um, an' I ain't been sleep nudder."

"Dat's de God's trufe," answered another who was evidently a partner of the first in the wood business.

"An' I aint heerd yit," continued the first speaker, "dat enny er dese white 'publicans hab de gripes when a nigger gits hongry."

"Now you whoopin', chile!"

"An I don't see dat waitin' roun' here is a-helpin' en us much. Democratic wittles is des ez sweet ter me ez dat what I'm makin' wid dat forty akers an' a muel. My boss is a demmycrat hisself, an' de pone er an' de bacon wha he perwides goes a ding sight fudder dan enny what I could buy wid de money dat I had losted in de Freedman's bank. Mount dis wagon, Remus, and le's git out er dis." (7)

Of these three dialect sketches, two have no white person speaking at all. The targets are certainly familiar to Small's readers: Northerners, Republicans, and fools. The "characters" generally are not distinguished from one another; indeed, only two characters are even named in the four sketches, Jim (Jeems) and Remus. Names seem to suit Harris as well as Sam Small.

Sylistically, however, Harris's pacing is slower and makes better reading than Small's rapid banter. Harris's style is wordier but a truer dialect. These sketches also are less dependent upon simple farce. Significantly, Harris, a white man, tends not to use the educated white man and old darky formula of the Old Si sketches. Either he shows a white Southerner duping a white Northerner or a black

man commenting on the behavior of other blacks. This serves to distance the entire work from the author. Harris never comes near the role of Interlocutor, whereas Small is difficult to separate from the role.

From 14 November 1876 through 21 January 1877 Harris's **Constitution** dialect sketches centered upon his spokesman, Uncle Remus. "Uncle Remus and the Savannah Darkey" was Uncle Remus's introduction to the public, and simultaneously, Harris's first attempt at rendering Gullah into print (8). Before Small returned to the **Constitution**, Harris had published eight Uncle Remus dialect peices--seven sketches and a song. In general, they all demonstrate a move by Harris away from the minstrel show structure, the minstrel show darky, and strictly topical issues (9). Harris's sketches tend to depict Uncle Remus as a street-smart customer, while Small's Old Si sketches are mere exercises in Old Si's observations and usually naive conclusions. The Old Si sketches tend to be static, wholly dependent upon the dialogue, while the Harris sketches already include description of settings and crowds, for example, and responses of more than one line. Further, Harris demonstrates skill not only with Middle Georgia dialect, but also with the coastal Gullah, while Small's representation imitates and even sounds like a minstrel show stereotype.

Even with these significant changes in style, structure, and content, these early dialect sketches by Harris are

barely memorable. Yet his dialect material began in earnest here, in a space of several months, while he was serving as a replacement for Sam Small. Uncle Remus was created as a substitute for, and for all practical purposes a copy of, Old Si.

Professor Hemenway states in his introduction:

A character named Remus appeared briefly in the October 31, 1876, issue, followed by Uncle Remus himself on November 28; for the next three years Harris periodically published sketches about this first Uncle Remus, an elderly ex-slave who occasionally dropped by the **Constitution** offices to beg from the staff and talk his darky talk. This Uncle Remus, little more than a delegate for white Atlanta's views of Reconstruction blacks...,eventually gave way to a second Uncle Remus, the 'old time Negro' of the Brer Rabbit tales... (1982:13) (10).

This second Uncle Remus tells animal tales, the first of which appeared in the **Constitution** on July 20, 1879. Five months later he reappeared with the tar baby story, and from then until May 1880 he became a regular feature of the **Constitution's** Sunday edition...(1982:14).

One might believe from this description that Harris had established himself as a regular dialect sketch writer by January 1877 and that the two Uncle Remuses are distinct characters. In reality, however, Harris's work with Uncle Remus stopped once Sam Small rejoined the newspaper. From February to October 1877 Small published twenty-six dialect sketches; Harris must have been reassigned, since Uncle Remus

never appears in sketch or song. Small's dialect sketches therefore dominate most of 1877.

Harris's career with the *Constitution* never faltered, however. He continued writing his column of course; in addition, during 1877 he published "Proemial to Putnam" (a story of Harris's return to Putnam County); "One Man's History" (an action-mystery story); and "A Romantic Rascal," subtitled "The Story of a Brilliant Bohemian." Harris was trying his hand at writing adventure stories set in the South.

On 14 October 1877 an unheralded story, "Uncle Remus as a Rebel: How He Saved his Young Master's Life," was published on the front page of the *Constitution*. This piece represents a significant break from the Sam Small-style dialect sketch, a fact that both Florence Baer and Robert Hemenway overlook. The length of the narrative--four to five times as long as the simple sketches--and its non-topical, apolitical features represent major shifts. Remus is no longer a faceless, obscure Atlanta darky; he now has a history and a character, revealed here as much by the fact that he tells the story as by his actions in the story. Joel Chandler Harris provides a context for Uncle Remus, both present (in Atlanta) and past (Putnam County) which turns Uncle Remus from a two-dimensional spokesman into a true character. Remus's heroics are the focal point of this story, as the old slave saves his master's life and plantation in Putnam County during the Civil War (11). Remus's loyalty to his master's family (Mars Jeems, Ole Miss, and Miss Sally), home, and property

is unswerving. It is Remus, for instance, who runs the plantation as overseer during the War, keeping the home functioning when no white males are available.

With the publication of "Uncle Remus as a Rebel" Harris took the first step in a long and prosperous career in literature, work which served as his avocation for the next thirty years. Remus had been sufficiently developed as a character to justify still further stories, and even the dialect sketches could draw on Remus's background on the plantation in Putnam County and his more recent move to Atlanta. Even "Uncle Remus as a Rebel" however, did not betoken Uncle Remus's return to the pages of the **Constitution**. The story in October was next followed by the dialect sketch "Uncle Remus on Education," in March 1878. This span of five months indicates that Sam Small's domination of dialect writing for the newspaper had not been broken.

Harris persevered at dialect sketch writing and other works for the newspaper. In March 1878 Harris's **The Romance of Rockville**, the novel he had worked on for months, began serialization in the Sunday issues of the newspaper. The book dealt with life in a small Southern town (Rockville, Eatonton) but failed to maintain character interest as the ending approached. Harris never firmly resolved how to end the book and his indecision caused the last chapters to lose all focus (12).

Harris's newspaper sketches--the Uncle Remus material--began to appear in the **Constitution** more frequently as Old Si dropped out of the newspaper completely. The explanation came in

the March 22 issue: Sam "Old Si" Small "has been working and is presently working on the Southern exhibit for the Paris Exhibition of 1878." Harris and Uncle Remus had the paper all to themselves. Harris's new sketches began shakily, but he found success with an unusual formula: he returned to the same subjects that Uncle Remus had discussed before. Now that Uncle Remus's background was established, Harris was able to develop Remus's comments more extensively. "The True Inwardness of the Mule" is just such a combination. The basic plot of the sketch should be familiar to the reader; it is very similar to the story told in Harris's first dialect sketch, "Jeems Roberson's Last Illness." Here, though, Harris has integrated the names and characters of Miss Sally, Mars John, and "Putmon" County into the sketch, recalling the background information first presented in "Uncle Remus as a Rebel." This addition recalls Remus's rural existence on the plantation, a distinct break from the previous urban-based sketches.

THE TRUE INWARDNESS OF THE MULE

"I hear Miss Sally readin' dis mornin' 'bout a man w'at got his face smashed wid a mule," said Uncle Remus yesterday. "I disremembers de name, but de paper sed de mule come mighty nigh gittin in his bes' licks."

"Cadie is the man's name."

"Dat's de identikil name. I tole Miss Sally den dat I speck he wuz a w'ite man, an' a mule's sump'n a nigger ain't got no bizness foolin' longer, let 'lone a white man. W'ite man kin larn joggerfy, en rethmetick, en all dat, but 'taint in de co'se

er nater fer 'im fer ter larn de mule. An' it's mighty few niggers dat gits as mule by heart. On Mars John's place in Putmon county, I plow'd a gray mule mighty nigh sex year, an' at de ve'y las' minnet, she retched out her hine foot an' picked a brass bre's-pin offen my cloze. An' yit I had my eye peeled fer dat mule endurin' er de whole blessid time. Nudder time I wuz sorter strucken wid de pl'u'sy, en a smart-aleck nigger got holter my mule. He put de gear on 'er en lipt on to 'er back fer ter ride 'er ter de new groun'. He didn't git outen de lot gate."

"Why not? What was the matter?"

"You ax Mars John, en he'll tell you dat right den an' dar he los' a sevin hudred dollar nigger."

"How was that?"

"De ex'bishun wuz mighty private, I tell you. Dere wuzzent no great todo. Hit wuz jes fo' day in de mornin'. De overseer, he wuz stannin' at de gate watchin' de han's pass, en he say he hear a little noise in de lot, like unto somebody scufflin' an' a cramblin'. W'en he went for ter zammin inter de racket, he foun' de smart-aleck I wuz tellin' you 'bout dubbled up under de troit, mixed up wid de britchin', an' a tracechain wropped all 'roun 'im."

"Where was the mule?"

"Oh, de mule! De mule wuz fas' asleep. She done gone and forgot all 'bout de 'musment. Peared like it might er happen'd de year befo' fer all she know'd 'bout it."

"Was the colored man really dead?"

"Dat's w'at dey sed, an' he haint never 'sputed it yit, do' dat's bin more'n thirty year ago. Don't tell me! I knows 'bout dese mules. W'ite folks better keep outen dere way, an' ef a nigger ain't mighty perlite in is' movements. Dey'll ketch him. I'm er talkin gospil now."

Harris's earlier version of "Jeems Roberson" essentially constitutes an

indictment of the fool Jeems Roberson. Uncle Remus's Narrative, on the other hand, indicts the mule for its orneriness; the black man is no longer the butt of the story. Thus the sketches operate quite differently. In the first, the narrator tells a specific experience (the death of Jeems Roberson) impersonally and unsympathetically, and the audience focuses on the foolishness of Jeems. The first sketch is set in Atlanta with no characterization, no sentiment, and all emphasis on the action narrated. In the second sketch, however, the narrator harks back to a rural setting, focusing on several specific experiences by which the mule is condemned. Uncle Remus is more sympathetic to the reader because he is more sympathetic about the people dealing with mules. Above all, the focus is now entirely on Uncle Remus as raconteur, recalling events rather than commenting upon them.

The recipe of revising familiar topics continued. Further, the average length of the Uncle Remus sketches grew as the character of Uncle Remus developed. Remus's monologues became frequent; the "straight man" shrinks to a few token lines, a far cry from the structural importance of the Interlocutor in the Old Si dialect sketches. Remus now almost never makes conscious commentary on contemporary events in the same city and times that Old Si dwells on; instead his attack is oblique, by means of comparisons in the sketch to former times. The consistent references to times past with Mars Jeems and Miss Sally invoke

nostalgia for a better, more secure past. The insecure days of Reconstruction cause Remus (and Harris's audience) to look backwards with a longing for the security, stability, and relative prosperity existent before the war.

Again Harris failed to obtain exclusive control of the newspaper's dialect sketches. In August, Sam Small returned and contributed several Old Si sketches. But Uncle Remus continued to appear, having developed into a fixture as much as Old Si. The rest of the year brought "Uncle Remus's Plantation Play-Song," and "Uncle Remus's Vote." January and February brought "Uncle Remus and His Troubles" and "Uncle Remus's Prodigal." In April, "Uncle Remus's Political Theories" appeared. Uncle Remus's continued appearance in the **Constitution** indicated that Uncle Remus was now perhaps as popular as Old Si. In the 20 April 1879 edition of the newspaper a new kind of sketch appeared. "Uncle Remus in Brief" was a brief comment summarizing Harris's life to date and noting that Harris was to be recognized for his Uncle Remus sketches by his inclusion in **Don't Give It Away**, "a compendium of American newspaper humor." The fact that the article says nothing of Sam Small and Old Si is even more revealing (13).

Further dialect sketches appeared in May, "Uncle Remus on Color" and "Uncle Remus as a Good Samaritan," as Uncle Remus continued to challenge Old Si's popularity. More significantly, in the edition of 8 June 1879 a notice announced Harris's intention to bring

out his first collection of Uncle Remus material "at an early date"--before any of the animal tales had been written or published. This notice is important because it indicates the popularity of the Uncle Remus dialect sketches: they now stand on their own as significant newspaper humor and are worthy of being collected into an anthology.

"Uncle Remus"

DARIEN TIMBER GAZETTE

It is with great pleasure that we announce the fact that Mr. J. C. Harris, a well-known and highly esteemed editor of the Atlanta Daily Constitution, intends, at an early date, to revise all of his writings in the negro dialect line and publish them in book form under the title of "Uncle Remus--his songs and sayings." Mr. Harris is one of the brightest writers in the whole country, and we are satisfied that his new book will have a tremendously large sale, both north and south, and especially in the cities and towns where he is personally known. In this state where Mr. Harris is so well and favorably known his book will, we have no doubt, have the largest sale of any book of its kind ever published in Georgia, as the price will be put at a moderately low figure. "Uncle Remus's" songs and sayings have been widely quoted throughout the whole country and have made for the author a world-wide reputation as a writer and humorist.

Before anything else could appear about the forthcoming volume of collected character sketches, Harris was pressured by newspaper work to postpone the

revisions he had planned for them. "Uncle Remus and the Fourth" appeared July 6. July 9 brought Sam Small's "Old Si: He Discusses the Right to Homestead on a Yaller Dog." Harris's work continued to delay the appearance of the book, but his dialect sketches in the newspaper continued to outshine Small's Sketches. The real beginning of the end, however, came in the issue of 20 July 1879 with an article titled "Negro Folklore: The Story of Mr. Rabbit and Mr. Fox, as Told by Uncle Remus." This was the first of the animal tales told by Uncle Remus and it introduced the little white boy on the plantation as the framing device for the folktales.

With this animal tale, the first one printed, Harris established the structure of all the animal tales to follow. The framework containing Uncle Remus, Miss Sally, and the little boy serves as the introduction while the folktale is dramatized by Uncle Remus for the little boy. This early tale does not display the ease with which later tales are told. The quotation marks led to difficulty setting the tale into print; the animals are "Mr." and "Mrs." to Uncle Remus, "Brer" to one another. However, these difficulties dropped out rapidly.

Harris's "Negro Folklore" did not attract immediate attention from the readers of the **Constitution**. Both Uncle Remus and Old Si continued to appear in dialect sketches from July through November. In the 16

November 1879 edition of the paper appeared "Uncle Remus's Folklore: Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox and the Tar-Baby." While this story presents only the first part of the well-known animal tale, leaving Brer Rabbit in the clutches of Brer Fox, this folktale began Harris's regular writings of animal tales. The Uncle Remus animal tales became a regular feature of the Sunday edition of the **Constitution**.

Harris's career blossomed with the series of Uncle Remus animal tales appearing regularly in the newspaper. In December 1879, he published three series of "Plantation Proverbs" under Uncle Remus's name. They, like the dialect sketches, paled next to the animal tales. The folktales continued to appear in the Sunday editions of the newspaper until May 1880, when Old Si suddenly reappeared. This is probably an indication that Harris had begun revising both the dialect sketches and animal tales for publication. The first announcements of the Uncle Remus book with the animal tales included appeared in April 1880 (14).

In July 1880, the animal tales reappeared briefly. A notice of the book announcing that it would be illustrated appeared on 6 August. Most of the rest of the fall (August, September, October) was traditionally spent on the political campaigns, so not unexpectedly nothing significant appeared from Harris. **Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings** was again advertised to be published "within

a few days" at the end of October. The notice announced that the illustrators were to be F. S. Church and J.H. Moser. The advertisement for the first edition appeared November 24, complete with a picture of Uncle Remus. On November 26, a front page notice announced that the first edition (3,000 copies) was exhausted on the second day of sale in New York, with more editions already being printed. Before the next Uncle Remus dialect sketch appeared in the newspaper on 5 December 1880, a congratulatory notice appeared, praising Harris and Georgia for the success of Uncle Remus (15).

Several conclusions can be drawn from this examination of Joel Chandler Harris's work from 1876 to the printing of the first Uncle Remus book in 1880. First, Joel Chandler Harris struggled and finally succeeded in becoming a newspaper humorist specializing in Negro dialect sketches. Harris learned the form from his predecessor and colleague Sam Small, who never developed the form further from his imitation of minstrel show skits. In fact, Harris's dialect sketches were so popular that plans for a collection of them--alone--were announced 8 June 1879, more than a month before the first Uncle Remus animal tales were ever published.

Harris's Uncle Remus appeared as a replacement for Small's sketches of Old Si and, at first, shared a number of characteristics with him. Both writers set their characters in Atlanta and use "an old darky"

to comment upon topical issues to a white audience. The complaints are generally about Republicans, carpetbaggers, and the younger generation of blacks. Shortly after Uncle Remus appeared in late 1876, Harris broke completely away from the model of Sam Small's dialect sketches. Harris characterized Uncle Remus (particularly in "Uncle Remus as a Rebel"), something Small never did for Old Si. This background data allowed a move from the urban, topical, political dialect sketch of Old Si to the rural, nostalgic dialect sketch of Uncle Remus. This transformation was complete by March 1878. There are not two distinct Uncle Remuses. Rather, Harris slowly developed Remus's character beginning in 1877 in the dialect sketches and "Uncle Remus as a Rebel." While Harris separated the animal tales from the dialect sketches in his first book, this is because he is aware of the difference in forms, not because they involve different characters. In fact, Harris's tenacity with Uncle Remus later caused him problems, when he brought Uncle Remus out of retirement in **Uncle Remus Returns**. Here, forty years after Uncle Remus first tells animal tales to the little white boy, Remus tells animal tales to the son of the first little white boy. Remus's powers of longevity were amazing; but then, so was his popularity (16).

Neither Joel Chandler Harris nor Uncle Remus has been treated completely fairly by American folklorists. Instead

of holding up Harris's work as probably the first significant collection of American folktales, or pointing out the care with which the narratives are rendered into several different dialects, American folklorists have generally criticized Harris for creating frames which set the narration of the animal tales into a context. As a result, if they pursue Harris's Uncle Remus material, folklorists tend to examine only the animal tales, ignoring other material appropriate for analysis (most obviously the songs and proverbs). This myopia also insures that folklorists develop no sense of how Harris's animal tales arose, for without knowledge of Small's Old Si sketches and the early Uncle Remus dialect sketches, the appearance of the animal tales cannot be fully appreciated. Further, instead of placing the development of Uncle Remus as a narrator into its historical context, folklorists have tended to present the plantation storyteller as a **fait accompli**, ignoring more than half of the first collection plus a number of sketches which have never been republished. The development of Uncle Remus from minstrel show darky to fleshed-out character and narrator is vital to comprehending the contribution Harris and Uncle Remus have made to American literature and American folklore.

One can only hope that folklorists will take another look at Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus. There remains a great deal yet to investigate. The works of Florence Baer and Robert

Hemenway have provided a great help recently. But both works tend to overlook background areas important to the origins of Uncle Remus, the creation of the frame of the animal tales, and, ultimately, the publication of the tales themselves. This is the first published account of this development and, it is hoped, will add to these works so that future folklorists and historians can place this work in a fuller perspective.

NOTES

(1) Joel Chandler Harris followed the first Uncle Remus book with **Nights with Uncle Remus: Myths and Legends of the Old Plantation** (1883), which included a scholarly treatise on Negro folklore by Harris, **Free Joe and Other Georgian Sketches** (1887), **Daddy Jake and the Runaway** (1889), and **Uncle Remus and his Friends** (1892). The other influential collections of Negro folklore from the time are Charles C. Jones, Jr., **Negro Myths from the Georgia Coast** (1888) and Mrs. A.M.H. Christiansen's **Afro-American Folk-Lore: Told round Cabin Fires on the Sea Islands of South Carolina** (1892). Two other influential works of the same period which include Negro folklore are Mark Twain's **Tom Sawyer** (1876) and **Huckleberry Finn** (1885).

(2) To date, no one has investigated the importance of Twain's novels or Harris's plantation short stories as ethnography and what impact these descriptions of Negro folk culture had, particularly in the 1880s, leading up to the founding of the Chicago Folklore Society and American Folklore Society. Nor has anyone yet investigated the relationship that both authors had with the American Folklore Society, although both men were members of the Society in 1888.

(3) Parsons may also be reacting to the return of Uncle Remus as a narrator nearly forty years after he first appeared narrating animal tales. By this book, published posthumously, Harris not only had fewer animal tales for Uncle Remus to tell, but the stylistic focus is clearly on the relationships in the frame, not on those in the animal

tales. There is also a dramatic shift in the narrative style from the first Uncle Remus book to a late one such as **Uncle Remus Returns**--a shift which also has yet to be studied.

(4) The Freedman's Savings Bank was begun in 1865 with funds from pay and pensions which the federal government owed black soldiers whom the armed services could not locate. The bank grew as agents encouraged black soldiers to save their money with the Freedman's Bank. By 1873 branches had opened in most of the major Southern cities. A splendid Washington, D.C., branch was opened with all black employees at great expense. This cost, combined with dishonest or unethical actions by several of the white officers of the bank, combined to put the bank seriously in debt. Despite valiant attempts by Frederick Douglass and others, the bank failed, and the black depositors lost everything. The U.S. Congress refused to insure the deposits or to aid the bank in its final months. For further details, see the history of the bank: Walter L. Fleming, **The Freedman's Bank: A Chapter in the Economic History of the Negro Race** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1927).

(5) All dialect sketches appear in the Atlanta **Constitution** unless noted otherwise. The sketches cited are representative, but certainly not exhaustive. A more complete listing is available in Montenyohl, 1975.

(6) For examples of minstrel show skits, see Charles Townsend, **Negro Minstrels with End Men's Jokes, Gags, Speeches, Etc.** (Saddle River, New Jersey: Gregg Press, 1969. Originally published 1891.)

(7) Aiken is a resort town in South Carolina, just across the Savannah River from Augusta, Georgia. This is not an exhaustive listing of Harris's first dialect sketches; a more complete listing can be found in Montenyohl, 1975.

(8) For other folktales in Gullah, see the tales told by Daddy Jack in the works by Harris. The collections by Charles C. Jones, Jr., and Mrs. A.M.H. Christiansen (cited in notes) are both important, as is Elsie Clews Parsons, **Folk-Lore of the Sea Islands, South Carolina** (Cambridge, Massachusetts: American Folklore Society, 1923).

(9) Harris criticized the minstrel shows and their portray-

als of the minstrel show Negroes in "Plantation Music", **The Critic**, III:95 (New York, December 15, 1883), 505-06. It is conveniently reprinted in Bruce Jackson (editor), **The Negro and His Folklore in Nineteenth Century Periodicals** (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1967), pp. 177-80.

(10) I have no explanation for Hemenway's dates.

(11) Harris revised this story and changed the ending before including it in **Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings** as "A Story of the War." This is the only time Harris signed any of his dialect material.

(12) **The Romance of Rockville** was later collected and published in Robert Lemuel Wiggins, **The Life of Joel Chandler Harris, from Obscurity in Boyhood to Fame in Early Manhood** (Richmond, Virginia: Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1918).

(13) Sam Small's Old Si dialect sketches were considered to be some of the most original newspaper humor ever to come out of Georgia. They were collected and published in Small, 1886. They have not been reprinted.

(14) "Negro Folklore," 9 April 1880, p. 2.

(15) The book was intended for the Christmas book market and so the publisher had 1881 printed on the title page. To the chagrin of the publisher and the author, the first printing was exhausted in November 1880.

(16) Harris had Uncle Remus "retire" as narrator from 1892 (**Uncle Remus and His Friends**) until **Told by Uncle Remus** appeared in 1905, followed by the creation of **Uncle Remus's Magazine** in 1907. Baer speculates that by 1892 Harris might well have been sick of the folkloristic analysis of his stories (particularly the emphasis on the origins of the tales). See Baer: 19-25.

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